DARK HORSE COMICS
30 YEARS
HELLO GAMES
ADVENTURES IN
NO MAN'S SKY
DAVE GIBBONS
ANGUS McKIE
JAMES SWALLOW

ADVENTURES IN

NO MAN'S SKY

COMIC WRITTEN BY
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SPECIAL THANKS TO *NICK McWHORTER* AND *ANDREA SANDERS* AT DARK HORSE COMICS AND *SUZY WALLACE* AT HELLO GAMES.

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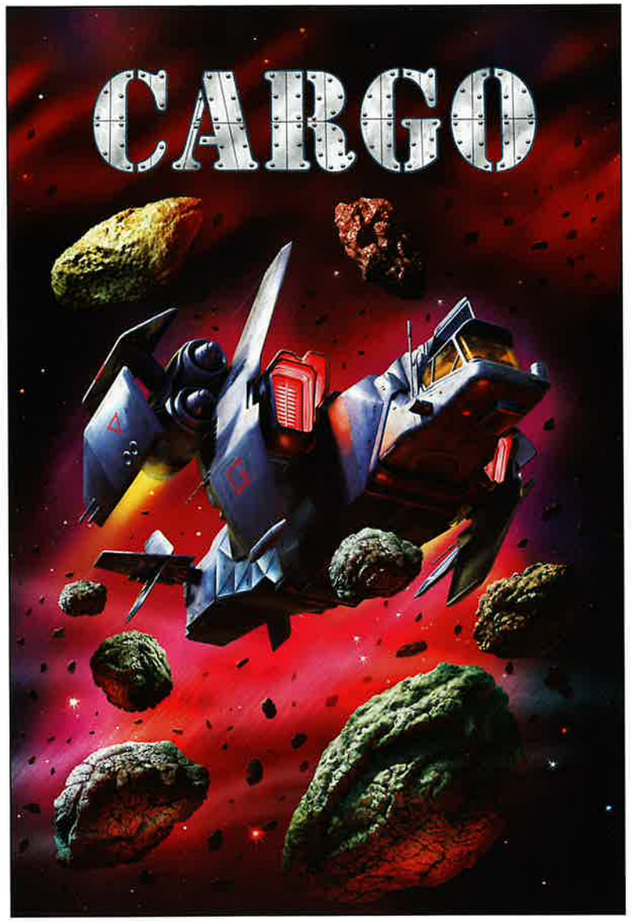


YOU REALLY THINK WE'LL *FIND* WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR, CAPTAIN? DO YOU THINK IT EVEN *EXISTS?*
WE KEEP LOOKING UNTIL OUR CARGO *DIES* OR UNTIL WE REACH THE *STATION.*

PROXIMITY ALERT. PROXIMITY ALERT.
LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING FOUND *US* FIRST!

VY'KEEN PIRATES! EVASIVE ACTION! I'M LOCKING DOWN THE *CARGO.*

CARGO STASIS FIELD ACTIVE.
WE'RE HIT!

TAKE OUT THEIR *THRUSTERS!*

WE CAN'T *OUTRUN* THEM, CAPTAIN.

GRAH! CUT YOUR REMAINING ENGINES, GEK. YOUR CARGO IS *OURS* NOW.

OUR CARGO IS WORTHLESS TO YOU.
GRAH! OUR INFORMATION IS THAT YOU ARE BEING PAID A FORTUNE TO TRANSPORT IT, SO I WILL BOARD YOU AND MAKE UP MY OWN MIND ABOUT THAT.

THAT INFOR-MATION COME FROM YOU, HELMS-MAN?
I TOLD NOBODY. WELL, ONLY--

GRAH! PREPARE TO BE BOARDED. NO PRISONERS.

YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN NOW, CAPTAIN.

STOP, COWARD! WE GEK HONOR OUR DEALS.

SORRY, CAPTAIN. I TRIED TO EVADE THEM.

BUT NO CARGO'S WORTH DYING FOR!

GRAH! NO SURVIVORS.

BOARDING PARTY FORWARD!

I AM A PROUD GEK TRADER AND I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN SURRENDER MY SHIP AND CARGO TO YOU PIRATE SCUM!

GRAH! VERY WELL THEN, TRADER. I WILL GRANT YOU THAT W--

W-- WHAT?!
WE'RE TAKING FIRE?!
GRAH!!

SENTINELS! DEATH! DEATH!

COMPUTER! GET US OUT OF HERE! FULL POWER!
GRAH! YOU KEEP YOUR CARGO AFTER ALL, GEK!

AND YOU CAN KEEP THE SENTINELS YOU HAVE ALERTED, PIRATE FOOL!

GRAH! DEATH! DEATH!

STATUS, COMPUTER?

ASSESSING DAMAGE. ASSESSING. HYPERSPACE GENERATOR COMPROMISED. SUBLIGHT RANGE REDUCED TO FORTY PERCENT.

FORTY PERCENT? IS THAT ALL?

JETTISONING CARGO WILL GAIN SEVENTEEN PERCENT RANGE OPTIMIZATION.

RE-COMPUTE COURSE. SEARCH LOG FOR KORVAX SITE OF ANTIQUITY.

SEARCHING. RETURNING ONE LOCATION WITHIN EXTREME RANGE LIMIT. CARGO JETTISON YES/NO?

NO. COMPUTE COURSE TO LOCATION.

COMPUTING. WARNING: TRAVEL BEYOND LOCATION WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE. CARGO JETTISON YES/NO?

NO. LOCK NEW COURSE. I'VE BEEN LUCKY ONCE. MAYBE I'LL GET LUCKY AGAIN AND FIND A RIDE HOME.

COURSE LOCKED.

FLIGHT DURATION TO LOCATION ESTIMATED AT THIRTY-EIGHT UNITS.

HMM. MONITOR THE CARGO AND WAKE ME WHEN...

APPROACHING SITE. APPROACHING SITE.

CAUTION. ATMOSPHERIC TURBULENCE SEVERE.
PLANETARY LANDING CANNOT BE RECOMMENDED AT CURRENT LOADING.
JETTISON CARGO YES/NO?

WE'RE LANDING THIS BUCKET, CARGO AND ALL. I'LL TAKE THE HELM.
HELM MANUAL. CAUTION. FUEL LEVEL CRITICAL. FAILURE TO REDUCE SHIP MASS MAY RESULT IN CREW DEATH.
JETTISON CARGO YES/NO?

NO. I'VE BEEN PAID AND PAID WELL. THE CARGO GETS DELIVERED.

DEAL'S A DEAL.

STATUS, COMPUTER?
GENERATING DAMAGE REPORT. UPDATE.

FUEL AT MINIMUM. LANDING GEAR JAMMED. JETTISON CARGO YES/NO?

NO. DIVERT ALL POWER TO CARGO STASIS FIELD. INITIATE EMERGENCY LANDING SEQUENCE.

SEQUENCE INITIATED.

SEQUENCE COMPLETE.

CARGO?

INTACT.

CARGO HATCH LOCK MANUALLY OVERRIDDEN.

ENTITY ∞12254? CAN YOU *HEAR* ME?

EHEU, I HEAR YOU, CAPTAIN, AS I HEARD THE PIRATES AND THE SENTINEL ATTACKS, AS I AM AWARE OF THE STATUS OF THIS VESSEL.
THEN YOU'LL KNOW WE HAVE COME AS FAR AS WE CAN.

YES, MY PILGRIMAGE MUST END *HERE*, FAR FROM THE *ATLAS STATION* OF WHICH I HAVE DREAMED, EHEU.
BUT I GOT YOU TO A *MONOLITH SITE*, AT LEAST. AND OUR *DEAL* SAID--

DON'T *WORRY*, CAPTAIN. YOU WILL HAVE YOUR FULL *FEE*. THE DATA SHOWS THAT YOU HAVE DONE ALL YOU *CAN*.
NOW, PLEASE, HELP ME TO THE *MONOLITH*, THAT I MIGHT HEAR ONCE MORE THE *ECHOES*.
OF COURSE. ALL PART OF THE DEAL.

YOU HAVE PROVED TO BE AN *HONORABLE* ENTITY, CAPTAIN. ONE LAST *REQUEST* OF YOU.
THANK YOU, *NAME* IT.

MY *SHELL*. THE CARAPACE OF MY ANCESTORS. IT MUST BE *RETURNED* TO MY PEOPLE, FOR THE GENERATIONS TO *COME*.
YOU WILL FIND THE *REMAINDER* OF YOUR FEE WITHIN IT.
CONSIDER IT *DONE*, IF I EVER GET OFF THIS *MUD BALL*.

EHEU, I *HEAR* THEM. I HEAR THE *ECHOES*. THEY SAY... THEY SAY THAT THE CYCLE *BEGINS*. THEY SAY...
THEY SAY THAT THE *TRAVELERS* ARE COME, EHEU. THE ECHOES SAY THEY BRING *HOPE*...

LOOK!

IT'S A MIRACLE!

MIRACLE? THERE ARE NO MIRACLES, CAPTAIN...

ONLY MATHEMATICS AND INFINITY.

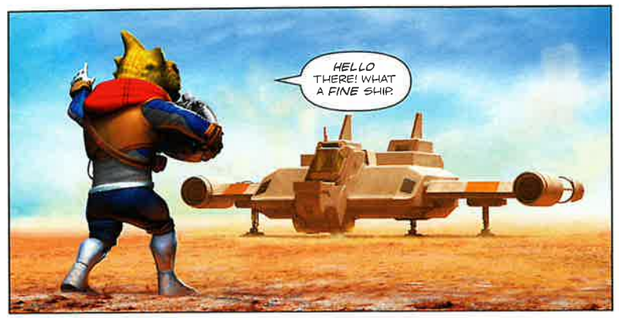
THEREIN LIES... THE SUBLIME.

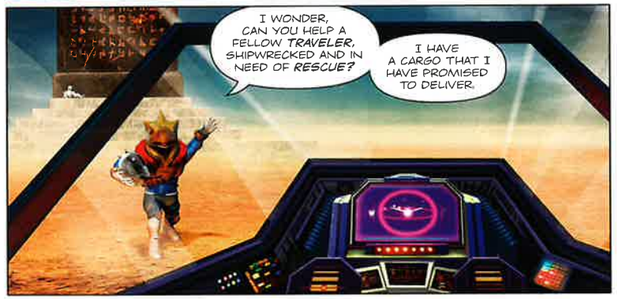
BUT, GIVEN THE STATISTICAL UNLIKELIHOODS OF BOTH THE PIRATE ATTACK AND THE SENTINEL RESCUE, THIS IS INDEED...

A MOMENT OF SUPREME...

IMPROBABILITY.

EHEU.


HELLO THERE! WHAT A FINE SHIP.


I WONDER, CAN YOU HELP A FELLOW TRAVELER, SHIPWRECKED AND IN NEED OF RESCUE?
I HAVE A CARGO THAT I HAVE PROMISED TO DELIVER.

MIGHT WE MAKE A DEAL?
END

ASHES & IRON
STORY: JAMES SWALLOW ART: DAVE GIBBONS

ASHES & IRON

The machines arrive.

Silent at first, as the wind pushes against them, drifting over the gnarled, sharp-edged talons of black volcanic rock. Perhaps you would think of a strange, legless insect if you saw one of them. Imagine a beetle's carapace floating there, sometimes darting this way and that like a mote in a current. Invisible waves of force impel them forward, presenting their flat, unblinking monocular eyes. Closer and closer, and as detail emerges, you would know they are not living things. Slates of armor line their iron flanks, and fangs that jet particle fire seek out those deemed worth punishing.

A ship would tell you these devices are called Sentinels. But that name would imply they are here to guard something. In most encounters, they are the aggressors; they adhere to some set of behaviors that cannot be known, only guessed at. They attack whatever they judge to be a threat. They are relentless in their pursuit. They reprimand any infraction with cold precision . . . but only they know what rules govern that choice. Sooner or later, you will fall foul of their unspoken edicts. You will upset the unseen balance that they watch over. The machines become a hazard as ambient as radiation, as ever present as vacuum. And just as deadly.

A group of them—a quartet, their most common number of deployment—hover over the dense, dark basalt sand, and now if you have the senses to hear it in this world's thin, cold atmosphere, you will catch the sound of their contragravity motors. They dither, and there is the sense that they may be communicating with one another, or perhaps with one of their larger sibling forms. Some are as big as a dropship. Others can blot out a sun.

Then the group breaks apart, and they begin to search the shallow rock canyons, quadrant by quadrant. They have an intruder to find, an offender who has broken one of their silent rules.

A single drone dips down, skimming the sand, peering into the shadows. There it finds a humanoid shape, statue still and half buried in the glittering volcanic ash. An environment suit, a lightweight, form-fitting model of the kind worn by pirates and explorers. Little to encumber the being within, a clever design—but this one has been damaged. There are ugly cracks across the polarized faceplate, dents on the chest modules and atmosphere processor. Has the suit been here for a long time? The Sentinel moves in for a closer look.

And that is when I destroy it.

Playing dead, I have lured it in. Perhaps it thought me to be a corpse, or the suit no more than discarded remains left behind by someone long vanished. I spring my trap.

I only have time for one shot, so it must count. Gripped in the suit's gauntlet, my multitool explodes from beneath the sand, already in weapon mode and fully charged to fire, the power in its beam matrix concealed from the Sentinel drone's sensors by the metallics in the powdery sediment. I put the glowing pulse blast right through the center of that unblinking eye and end its existence before it can warn its fellows that I am here. The severed-air crack of the beam is swallowed by the howling winds through the canyons, and the Sentinel tumbles, vomiting sparks and thin smoke.

I should stay and make sure it is dead, but time is against me. I am watching my life fall away through the changing numerals projected on the inside of my damaged visor. The air in here with me is fouling, breath by breath.

There are holes in the suit where I cannot reach, allowing native toxins to filter in, and I am helping death along by exhaling gases that are not being recycled. I will die of breathing, if I do nothing about it.

It is just one of the many paths to death that open to me at this moment. Suffocation. Starvation. Radiation poisoning. Those are the slower ones. The Sentinels represent the swifter end of that equation . . . and they are not alone.

I drag myself out of my hide in the sand, the fine black dust spilling from the crevices of my suit like water. The ankle I have dislocated is stiff and distant, like an artificial limb; this is because of the antishock medication and pain blockers. If the suit loses power, I imagine the agony will become quite unbearable. But as I think about that, I am grateful that the crash didn't kill me.

Pain fades and scars heal. I am not dead yet. I keep telling myself that. *You are not dead yet.*

Moving now, I follow a narrow, snaking crevice through shadows, pausing to peer upward once in a while. It would not do to become disoriented and lost.

Above, the sky is a dark, lustrous purple scattered with millions of diamond-bright stars. Is it always nocturnal here? I forget how far this stony world is from its parent sun, how long its nights might be.

A drone flits past over my head and I freeze. It doesn't sense me, but I know the others in the pack must be close. The end of the fissure in the rock is a hand's span away and beyond it is a clearing that will take me several seconds to cross. I am almost at the edge of the canyons, but I must be absolutely certain before I leave the protection of the shadows. The Sentinels will cut me down in a rain of fire if I am detected.

I wait. It grows more difficult each time.

Part of me screams that I should *flee*, go as fast as I can and hope to make it back to my ship before the machines zero in. It is hard to rein in that churning near panic pushing at the edge of my thoughts. But this barren ball of rock has revealed itself as a deathtrap, and acting without thinking will

see me perish. My remains will be left behind as another memorial to the mercurial will of a dangerous universe.

And yet, for all that, I cannot deny that it is beautiful here in its own way, as much as it is lethal. There is a kind of stark majesty to this planet. The black stone, with its wickedly sharp edges and needle-like structures, is ink dark but faceted like brilliant gems. It captures the faint light of those distant stars. Veins of radioactive ore thread through curves of rock that reach up and curl back like frozen waves. The glow is soft and blooms at the corner of my vision, sometimes crimson, sometimes amber. Through the faceplate's thermographic lenses, I can see the faint shimmer of ground warmth expanding from the volcanic mantle beneath the sands. It helps me blend into the backscatter, making it harder for the Sentinels to track me.

The heat brings other things, though. There is life in this place, as bleak as it is. Small, slithering forms that feed on hardy photophoric fungus, things little larger than my fist. They congregate in the weak starlight. At first I thought they were the apex of this world's food chain. That was a grave miscalculation.

From this vantage point, I can observe a pair of far larger creatures curled around a simmering volcanic vent, suckling at the warmth and the oozing chemical ejecta all around it. A fleeting glance would see only a bolus of rock, lined with streaks of glowing matter. Clever camouflage. But look again and you will see gills flutter as it breathes. You will see the powerful, muscled tail emerging from its torso, the two clawed limbs folded down low, and the eyeless nerve pits above a great maw that for the moment is mercifully closed. Are they dormant? There is no way to be sure. These predators use sensory palps that appear to detect perturbations in the electromagnetic field, and they have a desire to eat anything they encounter. They are the reason I have the holes in my suit. It doesn't matter to them that my blood chemistry is so vastly different to theirs that consuming my flesh would be like ingesting poison. I have learned the hard way that the predators are much like the Sentinels. They have rules behind their violence that I have somehow transgressed by simply being here. They cannot suffer me to live.

But I'm lucky in one instance. The predators seem to dislike the machines as much as they dislike me. It's rare to see such a thing, but it works in my favor so I do not question it. On most worlds, the Sentinels do not conflict with the local ecosystem, but here that rule does not seem to apply. I watch as a drone floats around in a lazy, descending spiral, its attention wholly focused on scanning a patch of black sand, and it does not sense the creatures until it is too late.

They move far quicker than something with such bulk should do. It's the lower-than-average gravity here, I think, that makes that possible. Jagged teeth meet ablative armor and the drone transmits a squeal of distress. I hear the hum of the Sentinel's companions as they vector in to render assistance.

This is my chance. Both beast and machine at each other's throats.

I bolt from the cover of the shadows while they are distracted, taking long and loping strides across the open clearing. My boots leave a visible path over the sand, and that dull pain from my ankle rings like a distant bell with each footfall. The medication is wearing off.

I don't look back to see if I have been glimpsed. I can't risk losing even a second of momentum. I'll know I've failed when razor-sharp incisors pierce my suit skin, or if an energy bolt burns into me. Running. *Running.* The pain is the tick of the clock, and my fear is my fuel. I do not want to die here.

The rock formations fall away behind me as at last I leave the gullies and ravines behind. The landscape flattens, becoming a dark, undulating plain that extends from horizon to horizon. Low mounds of ebon stone rise from the sand here and there, resembling the dorsal flanks of swimmer creatures emerging from a rolling ocean. All of it frozen in motion, and cast across such vast distance. I can't see my ship, but the locator in my suit knows where it is. *That way.*

I don't want to end on this brutal midnight wasteland, and have the last of me be nothing more than an upload signal sent into the void. How many have perished like that? Their last recorded deed to be the act of

finding an undocumented world, naming it unaware that it will be their grave marker.

I see stars at the edge of my vision. There are so many of them and I have so far yet to go, so much yet to learn. I can't die here. *I won't die here.*

I won't—

I came to this desolate place for the most prosaic of reasons. Because I thought it would enrich me. Is that foolish to consider, now, after all that has happened?

Out here in this unremarkable, nondescript star system, I came searching for a way to profit, for something that would help me in my journey. I'm not going to dwell on where I am heading; that's not a question to be asked, and it is not a thing to be understood by anyone else but me. I am a Traveler, and by name is to be by deed. *The universe is vast and full of possibilities;* my kind live our lives by that axiom. We can also die by it as well.

I admit, I was careless. Too in love with the awe of it all, too wrapped up in the desire to see what was next, what was beyond, past this world, past that sun, deeper and deeper into the glow of the galactic core. My head in the sky.

I thought the planetoid would be utterly lifeless. From space, it appeared as a smoky, ashen gem against a sea of sunlit orange nebulae, and no structures or intellect signs were visible. But *rich,* I thought. Young, by the reckoning of a planet's age, and heavy with valuable minerals or radiologic metals. Deposits of heridium, perhaps, or ioxinite. I planned to avoid any Sentinel patrols and take what I could to sell to the Gek for a good score of units. I knew there were stations and trading posts near Xonnas where I could gain a fair return. In my mind, I was already spending it.

But all thought of that went away in a flash, and suddenly I was living in that exact second, not thinking about an hour from now, a day, a month. I was fighting to survive, from moment to terrifying moment.

I felt it the instant my ship crossed the atmospheric interface. A sudden surge of turbulence from out of nothing. My sensors—briefly blinded by the heat of reentry—did not register the plume of volcanic gas ejected miles into the air by the catastrophic eruption of a mountain range far below. I flew straight into a thick, churning morass of toxic gas and searing dust. Crimson lightning screamed around me, flashing off the curve of my cockpit canopy. Even through the antiflare coating of my visor, it was blindingly bright.

Claws of red fire raked down the fuselage as I plunged through the boiling, furious storm. Magnetized powder clogged the engine vents and fouled my maneuvering jets. The sensors became a mad swirl of incoherent data and false readings. There was no horizon, no way to know which direction was rock, which was sky. I could do no more than hold on and ride the plunge through this maelstrom, hoping for some flash of clarity, for some brief opportunity to seek escape.

It never came. I recall the earsplitting roar of the storm discharging a killer bolt of power into my ship. Bright little jags of blood-colored light danced over my controls, across my gauntlets, into my suit. My scream of pain echoed against the inside of my faceplate. Then the darkness swept over me like a great veil and I lost all sense of self. Awareness fled.

I never saw the ground rushing up to meet me. I do not recall the moment of impact. It was some time before I woke, and then it was to a chorus of shrill alarms and steady agony.

How much time did I lose, unconscious and teetering on the edge of life, as my suit's systems fought to save me? I don't know. The chronometer circuits were burned out by the lightning strike.

When I got the canopy open and slid out, down the scored, burned flank of the hull, through my cracked visor I saw the horror of my crash landing written across the landscape.

Thrown like a skimming stone across a lake, the ship had swept through a series of flat spins, glancing off rock outcrops and losing bits of fuselage along the way. It skidded to rest atop a shallow sand dune, leaving a wake of displaced dust to mark the path. Patient, persistent autosystems were already working through self-repair programs, trying to make my craft spaceworthy again. A futile endeavor, as I would soon discover.

I will say now that to look at the near wreck of my ship was physically painful for me. Travelers, we either identify too closely with our vessels or not at all, and I am of the former sort. The sleek blue-and-white dart that has conveyed me on my journey inward from the galactic rim is like kin to me. We've been through so much together. Many would think me foolish to consider it like I would a sister.

All I wanted was to get away from this blighted place, this black abyss that had tried to kill me and my craft. But it was not to be. The ship was unable to lift off, a core component of the gravity drive blown to pieces by the backwash of an overload.

At first I thought I could regenerate the damaged module, perhaps recover resources from the crystal pillars scattered about and reforge it using the ship's fabricator matrix. But to my growing dismay, I learned that the power surge through the system had ripped grotesque tears throughout the memory core. My ship had lost much of its internal knowledge bank to data corruption. Had I been able to find a beacon and make upload, that data could have been retrieved from the network in hours—but as I have said, this place was barren and distant and unknown.

The ship could not repair what it could not remember, and I will say now that those were my most desolate hours, as I saw no means of survival.

But then, a hope. The scanners were the first devices to return to full functionality, and with them came a chance to escape. I detected a dense mass reaction reading a good distance from where my ship had come down, off to the far north in the lava fields beyond the canyons. *Another vessel.*

Had it been there all along? How could I have missed it from orbit? I pushed those questions aside. If it was intact . . . if its gravity drive was not destroyed . . . it would be a simple act to scan the twin of the damaged component and upload it to my ship's self-repair system. The new scan would replace the corrupted version. My craft would heal itself, and I could quit this planet before it tried again to kill me.

It wouldn't be that simple.

It comes down to this: one step, then another. Fatigue has a way of blurring the edges of everything, wearing them down until the sharp corners seem careworn and smooth. But it's a falsehood, a poison that lulls you into docility. You are walking but you are not awake, not fully. And that's when something will come to end you.

You cannot be a pilot, a spacer, an explorer without coming across similar idioms used by all those who travel the stars. There's a phrase the Korvax have. It's a complex series of noises and tones to my ears, but translated, it transforms into undeniable fact: *When you travel the void, know only one truth. If your vessel fails, it will end you. If your tools or your suit fail, it will end you. If you forget a fact, overlook a matter, leave something behind, it will be the end of you. If in doubt, assume* all *things will end you.*

So morose it sounds. Space is danger and death. We poor little beings, bred to walk on mud, how dare we challenge the airless void? What possible reason can we have to try to break the bonds of gravity?

A chuckle forces its way out of my mouth. *What reason?* I only have to raise my head, peer up, and see that myriad of stars to know the answer. Even now, as the threat of death walks in my shadow, my heart is lifted by the majesty of what lies out there. The Korvax know it too. They understand. It is the desire to know the unknown that drives us forward.

I won't die here. I have too far to go.

The multitool hangs from a loop at my waist, and it clanks against my thigh as I walk. I am critically low on power elements, so each time I use it, I push myself a step closer to oblivion.

But at this moment it is my most precious possession. Inside its memory core is the intact scan of the drive component. The bequest of someone long dead, a being I will never know but who may yet save my life.

It took a long while to pick my way across the canyons, careful as I was.

At first the predators ignored me, and I was happy to return the gesture. They were wary of something so alien. I thought that would be enough.

The other ship came into sight soon after. I felt an uncanny shock when I saw it clearly. An agile, winged design that could have been a stablemate to my own vessel, close enough to make me briefly fear I had walked in a great circle. But no. There in the shattered cockpit, decayed to his bones and impaled upon a broken hull stanchion, lay a dead Vy'keen scout. His armor had been corroded by the atmosphere, all trace of his honorifics and clan sigils gone. His bulbous skull was slumped forward, empty eye sockets glaring at the horizon. I didn't disturb him.

Surveying the exterior of his craft, I found ragged wounds in the metal sporting carbon slag identical to that which dirtied my ship. The scout had suffered the same disaster as I, falling prey to the planetoid's volcanic storms, but he had not shared my luck. He could have been here for hundreds of rotations, lost and forgotten.

I looked away before my mind played the trick of exchanging my face for his. The scan took only a short time to complete, and then I departed—but not before offering words of thanks to the dead one. Perhaps the Vy'keen Ancients would hear me, and honor his sacrifice accordingly.

I started back, and I allowed myself to think this might be over.

Foolish.

I see them moving. The blind predators have followed me from the canyons, slinking from the cover of rock to rock, stalking me. They must be able to sense the metal in my suit, my equipment, perhaps even the faint electromagnetic field of my own flesh. They have my "scent" and they won't stop coming.

I killed some of them. They left me little choice. But now I am a threat to them, and they won't rest until those fangs are tearing into me.

They struck on my way back from the downed Vy'keen vessel. Surrounding me, coming in from all sides in a coordinated attack. I barely had time to realize what was happening before they burst out of the gloom, leaping

at me, propelled forward on those thick, muscled legs.

Too many to dodge. One knocked me down with a glancing blow to the ribs, and another came in to take first blood. Warning glyphs blossomed on the inside of my visor as pain lanced through my torso. Tusk-like teeth as long as daggers sliced cleanly through ablative layers of antimeteor cloth and support sheath. Another tried to crush my helmet in its mouth and I saw the flash of a rough, muscular tongue covered in sucker pads.

I burned that one in two with the multitool. Drawing it, switching to Boltcaster mode, firing—those acts were as fast as reflex. Azure energy bolts shrieked as they blasted the creature back and away into a smoking heap. It did not stop the others. If anything, daring to defend myself against the predators seemed to enrage them even more.

I dragged myself back to my feet, batting one away with a backhand swipe. Fired again, giving another a livid, weeping wound that sent it away howling. I could feel the new injury in my back in a steady, con-

stant burn. I heard the hissing of chem foam filling the deep cut and clotting it. Numbness spread and I lurched away, scrambling into the nearest of the narrow canyon passages.

Firing the Boltcaster was a mistake, but I had no other choice. The Sentinels sensed it and they came, as inexorable as sunset. Killing the alien beasts, daring to defend myself against them, I did not need to wonder if that was a Sentinel rule I had broken.

The machines, they prosecute the destruction of *all* life, regardless of the circumstances. If I had let myself be a feast for the predators, would they have judged that right and fair, or would they have come to my aid? The question is moot.

It is no exaggeration to say that everything in this desolate place now wants me *dead*.

I escaped the Sentinels in the canyons, thanks to the vicious character of the native creatures, but I am not safe yet. The predators have learned from their mistakes. They fear the glitter of the multitool, the searing burn of its plasma bolts. I see them at a distance, pacing me without coming too close—and when I sometimes stumble over a rock or my pace falters, I can see their bodies shift and ripple with anticipation.

They are waiting for me to fall. They know I am wounded and exhausted. All it will take is a single misstep. If they sense I am weak, that will be my end. I don't know how many of them are out there in the blackness, but I hear their tails dragging across the sand, their claws scraping on rough rock.

You are not dead yet. I say it aloud, like an invocation. *I won't die here.* The words make it true. *Don't they?*

This must not be how it ends. Not on some nameless, unknown sphere far from any vestige of civilization. I cannot allow myself to fall; I won't submit to the same bleak fate that claimed that luckless Vy'keen scout.

I have to find my kind. Others. Other Travelers. I can't be the only one. That must not be. If I am all that is left, then I must know for certain. And if not, if there are more like me out there among the stars, we have to find each other. There is so much more sky out there to search for.

I reach the top of the low dune, and at the crest, the sand crumbles. My boots sink and I almost tip over under my own weight. But there, so close now, revealed hard and angular in the starlight, is my ship.

I am going to survive. *I will.* This is not the end. I am going to get away from here. *I won't die here.*

I ignore the slithering predator beasts as they dare to slink out of cover in my wake. Stirred by my sudden burst of movement, they're drawing near, maws widening in anticipation.

Down the steeper face of the black dune, sand spilling in waves, I have my tool in my hand and at the ready. I just have to set it to talk to the ship, to fabricate the module. It will only take moments. I can leave. I can be free of this landscape of ashes and iron. I am almost there.

And then I realize something is wrong.

The ground is not the same. The flat, scarred wilderness where I landed has been shifted, tilled, and turned. Displaced mounds of dark grit are pooled all around. Something has dug into the ground here, something large.

There's a shadow in front of my ship that was not there before. Angles and hard corners protruding from the black sand. I skirt around the craft, peering at the gloom. In the pool of darkness cast by the downed vessel, at first I can't see what it is. But then a crimson glow flashes into life, a baleful monocular machine eye staring out at me without pity.

The ground trembles and sand boils up in a surge, peeling back to reveal the thing buried there. A Sentinel, yes, but not a drone. Far larger, far more deadly.

They learned from me. They observed and understood. They have turned my ambush against me, hiding beneath the sand until I came too close to escape them.

The towering walker rises on two curved, many-jointed legs, piston muscles hissing, myomer cables tensing and clenching. A roughly cube-shaped body, its unfinished planes gathered in a cage of angles, shud-

ders as it pivots in place. Arcane, complex sensors and detector webs scowl down at me. Even in the thin atmosphere, I can hear the sounds of it operating. Ticking and clicking, humming and howling. Weapons emerge and charge cycles begin. It is going to kill me within sight of my ship. Retribution, perhaps, for my arrogance in thinking I could escape my punishment.

It advances, the ground shaking as it trudges toward me.

Every instinct in me is to flee. The raw animal terror floods my veins and I want to turn about and run. But I know this time that I won't make it far before crimson bolts tear me apart. So I fight the tide of panic and do exactly *other* than what is expected of me.

I sprint *toward* the walker, ignoring the pain from my leg and my torso. I know that the wounds have reopened from the exertion. I feel sluggish blood oozing against my flesh inside my suit. But I can't stop.

The Sentinel fires, misses, turning patches of the black sand into ebony fulgurites. Its target estimates are momentarily offset by my unexpected behavior. It can't turn fast

enough to compensate, and then I'm passing through the gap between those high, grinding metal legs, under its boxy torso, and away.

I feel it pivot in place, coming around to chase me down. Each machine footfall is a dull drumbeat that rolls across the sand. It wants to end me.

But I cannot stop. To allow myself to think would be to question, and to question would be to die. I bound up the side of the scarred dune, and waiting for me there atop it are the stalker creatures, snapping at one another and furious at this new invasion of their territory.

The Sentinel walker hunches forward and follows, tracking me with singular, robotic focus. It is only when it crests the dune that its synthetic mind understands: I have led it into a pack of alien predators.

The lower gravity here allows me to put all my drive into one great leap, even as I feel something tearing inside my body. Heat ripples through my belly as I throw myself aside and away from the dune. I land badly and fall into a headlong tumble, bouncing and spinning back down toward the scarred sands and my damaged ship.

When the fall ends, when I drag myself up, I can hear the skirl of energy blasts and the screeching of the blind predators. Up on the low ridge, the biped walker staggers drunkenly in circles as the stone-colored creatures mob it. It mashes one of them into the black dirt under a huge iron foot, but others are chewing on dangling power cables, spilling out strange processor fluids in spurting jets.

The Sentinels are clever, but not clever enough. In the end, they have only cold machine logic with which to understand a contradictory and chaotic universe. It is said that what exists may be born from a seed of complex formulas, but the product of that will ever be raw, wild, unexpected. *Unknowable.*

That is what makes the universe so beautiful and so terrible. That is what makes me want to see it all.

I limp to my ship and fall into the cockpit. The canopy seals shut and I feel the vessel interface with my suit and the memory core of my multitool. Breathable air floods the compartment. Repair icons blink on, equally at work in trying to heal both me and my craft.

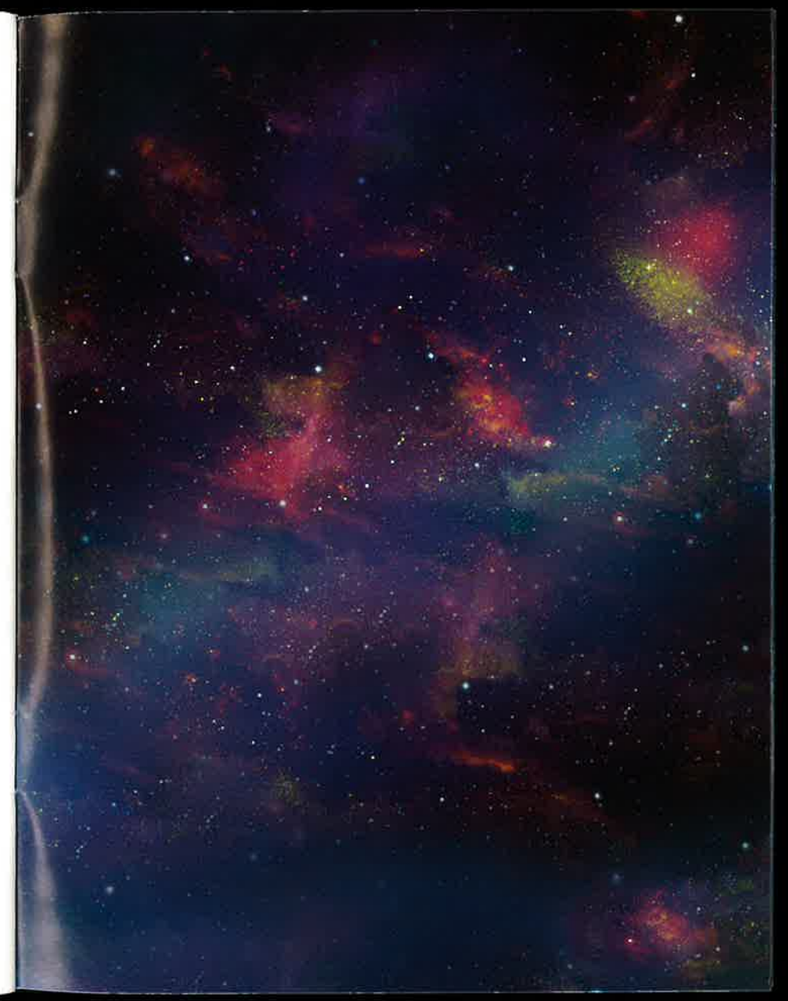
I would be afraid if I had the energy. Was the scan enough? Can the ship lift off? My vision clouds with a gray, sparkling fog that encroaches from the corner of my sight. Every sound takes on a dull, hazy quality as if it comes to me from underwater. Am I dying? Did I linger too long in this place?

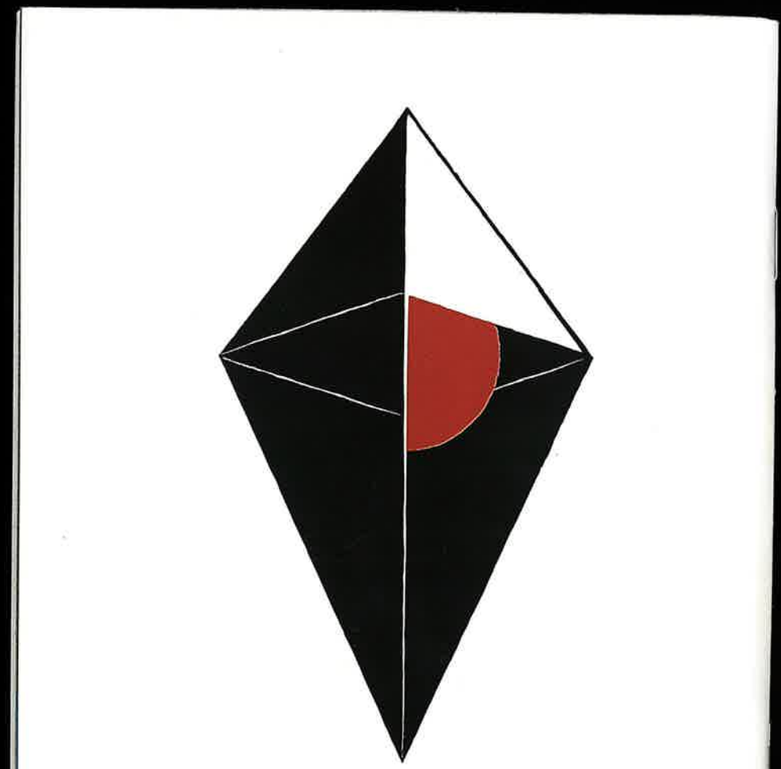
I remember the decayed body of the scout. I see my face upon his. Has this already happened? Am I as much a ghost as he is?

Slowly gravity lessens its pull upon my body. Perhaps I am moving. Perhaps the ship is working now, and it has left the surface, left the Sentinels and the predators to fight one another. Or perhaps my senses are failing and the numbness is my body shutting down.

It takes all the effort in me to tilt back my head, reach up and slide open my visor. I think I feel the warmth of suns upon the bare skin of my face. And through a fading tunnel of sight, as consciousness dissipates and that familiar veil of darkness comes again, I look and *I see*. My gloved fingers extend, and just for a moment I can touch them.

The diamond-bright stars.





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